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Teachers' and parents' perception on effective strategies for dropout prevention

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Abstract

Dropout normally occurred amongst high risk learners who experience failures in school examinations and absentees. Various interactional factors influenced the probability of dropping out from school. Academic, social, emotional and societal factors are reported to influence dropouts. In Malaysia dropout prevention strategies have been an important national agenda in the Tenth Malaysia Plan as well as in Vision 2020 to reduce the gap in academic achievement. The objective of this study was to examine effective dropout prevention strategies according to the perceptions of teachers and parents. The study involved a focus group session with 20 secondary school teachers and 20 parents who were in the Parent-Teacher Association of the school.

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1. Introduction

There are many interactional reasons why drop out occurred. Therefore there is no one particular factor that determines dropout. Dropouts can occur because of poor attendees in school, leaving school early and avoiding examinations or a student has to leave because of poor grades. Undeniably early childhood education provides the stimulus for subsequent success.

The decision to leave school is typically not an instantaneous event (Finn, 1993). Many students who drop out were experiencing disengagement from school that has been foreshadowed by indicators of withdrawal e.g., poor attendance and unsuccessful school experiences (e.g., academic or behavioural difficulties) (Rumberger, 1995). These students are not accepted in the mainstream because of their poor performance in an exam oriented system. The latter thus argue a lack of self esteem.

These overt indicators of disengagement are demonstrated by feelings of alienation, a poor sense of belonging, and general dislike for school (Ekstrom, Goertz, Pollack, & Rock, 1986). Past studies have shown that identification of dropouts can be accomplished with reasonable accuracy based on review of school performance (behaviour, attendance, academics) during the elementary years (Barrington & Hendricks, 1989).

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Factors can be seen as static or flexible. Demographic and status variables, e.g., socioeconomic standing, disability or ability level, family structure, are difficult and unlikely to change. On the other hand, alterable variables e.g. attendance, identification with school, are easier to change and can usually be influenced by students, parents, educators, and community members. Dropout factors include both “push” and “pull” effects (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Push effects include situations or experiences within the school environment that intensify the feelings of alienation, failure, and the desire to drop out. Pull effects include factors that are external to the school environment that prevent school completion. Both factors are considered equally important.

More often dropouts seem to hate school. They could not get along with teachers, are suspended, have low grades, get pregnant, have financial responsibilities, have caretaking responsibilities, and prefer to be employed. Students most often cite push factors as reasons for dropping out of school. The decision to drop out most often involves multiple factors (Kortering & Braziel, 1999).

Effective strategies mentioned in the literature include providing vocational education for those who are non performers in the academic line and a counselling program that deals with personal issues of students such as stress (Hayward & Tallmadge (1995).

McPartland (1994) suggested that schools provide opportunities for success in schoolwork e.g., intensive reading instruction in early grades, tutoring, curriculum modification to increase relevance.

Schargel & Smink (2001) recommended: Early intervention which includes comprehensive family involvement, early childhood education, and strong reading and writing programs as well as basic core strategies to promote opportunities for the student to form bonding relationships which include mentoring/tutoring, service learning, alternative schooling, and out-of-school enhancement programs. School renewal can be adopted through community collaboration and agreement on the best practices.

2. Objectives of the Study

The objective of this study was to examine effective dropout prevention strategies according to the perceptions of teachers and parents.

3. Methodology

The sample of the study included a purposive sample of 20 secondary school teachers who have more than five years of teaching experiences and 20 parents of ongoing secondary school students who are also in the Parent-Teacher Association of the school. The respondents were interviewed in semi structured two focus group sessions. The verbatim reports of the respondents were coded and analyzed according to themes focus group.

4. Results of the Study

The results indicated that teachers and parents were in agreement on several plausible causes and strategies that can be categorized into several themes

- (a) The importance of Engagement with parents
- (b) Developing Safe and Conducive Learning Environment
- (c) Detecting Early Warning Signs
- (d) Relevancy and Joy in learning
- (e) Developing a more challenging Curriculum
- (f) Personalizing learning through Class Size
- (g) Flexible Schedules

- (h) Developing a Community Plan
- (i) Investment in Preschool
- (j) Adopting a Student-Centred Funding Model
- (k) Focusing on important issues surrounding Drop Outs
- (l) The Need for Effective Literacy Instruction
- (m) Promoting Active Experiential Learning

4.1 The importance of Engagement with Parents

Several responses were recorded such as:

Respondent {1} “Parents tend to depend too much on teachers to take care of their children. The rich do not mind donating money and the poor did not bother to check their children’s work “Once inside the school doors everything is left to the teachers to decide Thus I suggest that one should communicate more with parents on a more regular basis”

Respondent {5} “Parent involvement declines as students get older and become more independent. At kindergarten parents are so concerned about their children safety but at the primary and secondary schools they see their children as more independent. Therefore regular communication with school staff on the child's schedule, courses, remains important”

Respondent {10} “Be aware of the parents as educators. They need to be actively involved not just appearing at the end of the school semester to meet the teachers to discuss grades”.

4.2 Developing Safe and Conducive Learning Environment

Responses from the respondents were:

Respondent {5} “Studying in school is not just academic in nature; it involves non academic factors such as relationship. Teachers and students should work together in a productive harmonious relationship”

Respondent {11} “Are the teachers concerned about potential drop outs. They tend to favor the brilliant high achievers and leave out the slow and underachievers behind”. “They should be more empathetic toward the slow ones”.

Respondent {9} “There are students who hated to go to school; simply because their teachers ignored them “Teachers should be more sensitive. Don’t talk down to students”

Respondent {7} Develop a supportive relationship in schools. Make the students feel they are in family situation in school”.

4.3 Detecting Early Warning Signs

Respondent {14} “Teachers should be able to detect that students are at risk by noting their behaviors in class and not wait till they fail”

Respondent {12} “What happened to the remedial classes? Are they still functioning?”

Respondent {8} “Teachers should be taught to screen and diagnose at risk learners”

Respondent {15} “It’s bad that majority of the teachers teach to the mass majority. ” Teachers should be able to weed out the poor ones”

Respondent {17} “ Develop proper profiling of students achievement please!”

4.4 Relevancy and Joy in Learning

Respondent {20} “We feel bored as the lessons are not interesting”, “Therefore please make the class more interesting”.

Respondent {8} “I don’t like to sit still in class moreover I am a slow learner”

Respondent {14} “All we discuss in classes are examinations and how to spot exam questions”. “Can we have active learning sessions outside in the real world?”

4.5 Developing a More Challenging Curriculum

Respondent {10} “Have a more challenging curriculum that meet the needs of all”.

Respondent {16} “Should have a curriculum for both the gifted and the left behind”.

Respondent {20} “Please provide a more interesting curriculum to face the real world outside school”.

: Use cooperative learning in the class to develop group cohesion and acceptance”.

4.6 Personalizing learning through Class Size

Respondent {10}”The class size in an ordinary school is 40. This impedes learning “

“We need to reduce class size from 40 to 25 to get personalized attention”

Respondent {14}”Students can be naughty in a large class and they don’t pay attention. Teachers tend to lose control. I suggest a good size of one teacher to 15 students”

Respondent {7} “If we have smaller schools or smaller class sizes, that would assist in discipline problems”.

4.7 Flexible Schedules

Respondent {5} “I help my parents during fruit season s thus I cannot attend school”.

Respondent {20} “There are students who are poor and do not attend school regularly. We need to develop other alternatives “.

Respondent {2} “Got to help my family by working part time”.

Respondent {10} “Need to develop a more flexible schedule”.

4.8 Develop a Community Plan

Respondent {17} “Policy makers and educators should form effective Community Drop out Prevention Program”

Respondent {8} “Research should be conducted to evaluate the existing profile of students at risk”

“Parents need to attend workshops on Dropout Prevention and detection”

4.9 Investment in Preschool

Respondent {6} “There are students who lack behind because they did not have early preschool education” “Ensure more opportunities for four and five years old”

Respondent {8} “Have pity on those in the poor slum areas. The government should build more preschool centers”

Respondent {13} “There are poor students who do not have adequate resources. We need supportive mechanisms for them”.

4.10 Adopting a Student-Centered Funding Model

Respondent {16} “Increase funding for the poor and disabled”.

Respondent {11} “ More budget for the poor and needy”.

Respondent {4} “ Provide free tuition”.

Provide Counseling Services for At Risk Students

Respondent {8} “Schools should provide both personal and career counseling”

Respondent {16} “Engage more counselors to help in problems related to learning”

Respondent {10} “Develop a systematic profile of slow learners and underachievers. Improve school achievement”.

4.11 Focus on Important issues Surrounding Drop Outs

Respondent {16} “Programs to prevent drop out should focus on increasing graduation rates; increasing in self-esteem and school attendance;”

Respondent {19}” Programs of dropouts should focus on decreasing discipline referrals;

Respondent {6} There is the need to decrease early pregnancy rates “

Respondent {14} Can the government secure jobs and opportunities in community service?“

4.12 The Need for Effective Literacy Instruction

Respondent {16} “Ensure resource centers to create a book-rich literate environment”.

Respondent {17}”Have teacher read-aloud sessions and students read aloud to others; or shared reading”.

Respondents {19}”Have writing strategy workshops”

Respondent {13}”Have a variety of reading and writing activities;

Respondent {7}”Allocate more time for reading and writing.”

4.13 Promote Active Experiential Learning

Respondent {18}” Promote problem-based learning and reciprocal teaching;”

Respondent {10} “Promote peer tutoring, cooperative learning, hands-on learning, projects, role play, simulation, and inquiry.”

Respondent {14} “Need to pay attention to how boys learn, thus need active hands on experiences and project based approaches”.

3. Discussion and Implications

Several strategies were cited by both teachers and parents. These strategies appear to be familiar locally and internationally. Strategies are related to both the push and pull factors influencing dropping out of school. To understand student better, records should be used when are possible, allowing for development of an early identification system in elementary and middle grades.

To be effective, intervention and prevention strategies should always be obtained from the identified characteristics of the population. An ongoing monitoring system should include an annual review of students who are identified as potential dropouts. Finally for change to occur there must be the willpower and consensus that change is needed, the capacity to plan and implement reform from within the teaching learning situation as well as at the macro level of policy making. Mentoring programs need to be designed for better academic achievement. Other strategies include employment or career preparation, social or behavior modification, family and parenting skills, and social responsibilities. Benchmarking with other successful drop out prevention programs worldwide should be encouraged.

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